Direct Answer

Yes — substantial evidence from biblical usage, Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) treaty and legal terminology, and Second Temple/rabbinic and New Testament sources indicates that "love" and "hate" in covenant, marriage, and election contexts functioned as a comparative idiom of preference and choice, not necessarily emotional contempt. This idiom would have been intelligible to audiences across the biblical timeline, from the patriarchal narratives through the first century C.E.

The Linguistic Pattern in the Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew verb שָׂנֵא (sane, "to hate") repeatedly appears in contexts where it functions as the grammatical opposite of "love" within a comparative rather than absolute framework. In Genesis 29:31, Leah is called שְׂנוּאָה (senuah, "hated") immediately after the narrator states that Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah" (Genesis 29:30), showing the term operates as shorthand for "loved less" rather than despised. Modern translations such as the NKJV and NIV render the same word as "unloved" precisely to capture this comparative sense.[1][2]

Deuteronomy 21:15-17 formalizes this idiom into law: a man with two wives, "the one loved and the other unloved" (or in the KJV, "one beloved and another hated"), must still grant inheritance rights to the firstborn son of the "hated" wife. This statute demonstrates that "hated" was a recognized legal-technical term for the disfavored or secondary wife, not a term implying abuse or malice, and ancient Israelite legislators assumed their audience understood this distinction well enough to codify inheritance rules around it. Rabbinic sources reinforce this: several classical commentators explicitly argue "it is unthinkable that Jacob would have actually hated Leah... she was his wife," concluding the term reflects comparative disfavor tied to Rachel's greater status rather than literal antipathy.[3][4][5][6][^7]

Ancient Near Eastern Treaty Backgrounds

The most decisive external evidence comes from ANE international and treaty vocabulary predating and surrounding Israel's monarchy. William Moran's landmark 1963 study demonstrated that in the Amarna correspondence (14th century BCE) between Egyptian pharaohs and vassal or peer kings, "love" was standard diplomatic terminology denoting political loyalty and alliance rather than personal affection — the Pharaoh was "expected to love his vassal," and vassals described their loyalty using the same term. Correspondingly, disloyal vassals or rebels were described as "hated" or as those "who do not love" the sovereign, establishing love/hate as a technical loyalty-disloyalty binary in diplomatic discourse.[^8]

This pattern persisted into the first millennium BCE: the Neo-Assyrian Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon (7th century BCE) commands vassals, "You will love Assurbanipal as yourselves" — a stipulated, legally binding loyalty rather than a spontaneous emotion. Scholars including Jon Levenson note that such treaty love "is not emotional, or only emotional; it reflects obedience and action," and that Deuteronomy's repeated command to "love the LORD your God" draws directly on this covenantal-diplomatic register. A parallel Korean-language study on Northwest

Semitic inscriptions (Sefire, Kilamuwa) further confirms that "love and covenant" terminology in Deuteronomy reflects a broader West Semitic treaty tradition, not an isolated Israelite usage. This means that ANE audiences — including Israelites, Arameans, and neighboring vassal states — operated within a shared linguistic convention where "love" and "hate" signaled covenantal status (chosen/loyal versus rejected/disloyal) rather than raw emotion.[9][10][^8]

Malachi, Romans, and the Esau-Jacob Oracle

Malachi 1:2-3 ("Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated") and its citation in Romans 9:13 apply this same idiom to divine election. Commentators note the "hate" here targets Esau's *lineage* (Edom) and its exclusion from covenant privilege — "God's rejection of Esau's lineage as the covenant line," not personal malice toward Esau himself, since Edom is elsewhere promised its own blessing. This reading is corroborated by the same comparative-love grammar seen in Genesis 29 and Deuteronomy 21, suggesting a consistent idiomatic register spanning centuries of biblical composition.[11][12][13][14][^15]

First-Century Evidence: Jesus' Teaching and Qumran

By the first century C.E., the idiom remained current and was actively used by Jewish teachers, indicating continuous intelligibility through the New Testament period. Jesus' statement in Luke 14:26 — that a disciple must "hate" father, mother, and even his own life — is widely recognized by scholars as Semitic hyperbolic comparison, since the parallel in Matthew 10:37 renders the same teaching as "loves father or mother *more than* me," confirming the "hate" language meant subordinated priority, not literal hostility. Scholars specifically note Aramaic lacked a grammatical comparative construction, forcing speakers to use blunt "love X, hate Y" phrasing to express degrees of preference — a structural linguistic explanation for why this idiom was so persistent and would have been unremarkable to a first-century Aramaic/Hebrew-speaking audience.[16][17][^18]

The Qumran community's Dead Sea Scrolls documents (Community Rule, War Scroll) from the same general period employ parallel "love/hate" covenantal-membership language: initiates swore "to love all the sons of light... and to hate the sons of darkness," where "hate" denotes covenantal opposition and group boundary-marking (the sons of darkness being identified with Edom, Moab, and other outside nations) rather than a claim about the emotional disposition of individual members. This shows the idiom was alive and structurally embedded in sectarian Jewish covenant theology contemporaneous with the New Testament, reinforcing that first-century audiences would have recognized "hate" language in Malachi and in Jesus' sayings as operating within this same established idiomatic tradition.[^19]

Summary Table

Evidence Type	Period	Example	Function of "Love/Hate"
Genesis narrative	~2nd millennium BCE setting	Jacob "hated" Leah vs. loved Rachel (Gen 29:30-31)	Comparative marital preference [1][2]
Mosaic law	Composed by ~1st millennium BCE	"Loved" vs. "unloved" wife inheritance rule (Deut 21:15-17)	Legal-technical term for disfavored status [5][6]

Evidence Type	Period	Example	Function of "Love/Hate"
ANE diplomacy	14th-7th century BCE	Amarna letters, Esarhaddon Succession Treaty	Political loyalty/disloyalty [8][9]
Prophetic oracle	~5th century BCE	Malachi 1:2-3, "Jacob loved, Esau hated"	Election of covenant lineage [15][14]
NT teaching	1st century CE	Luke 14:26 vs. Matthew 10:37	Comparative discipleship priority [17][18]
Sectarian Judaism	1st century BCE-1st century CE	Qumran Community Rule "sons of light/darkness"	Covenant membership boundary [^19]

Caveats and Scholarly Nuance

Not all commentators treat the idiom as purely non-emotional. Some rabbinic and traditional sources (e.g., Abarbanel, cited in Torah anthologies) argue Jacob's disposition toward Leah did carry genuine emotional coldness evidenced by his behavior, even while affirming the term also carries legal-technical weight. Scholars similarly debate whether Deuteronomy's covenantal "love" retains an emotional-erotic dimension alongside its legal-political sense, particularly given Deuteronomy 7:7's language of divine desire. The consensus nonetheless holds that "hate" in these texts is best understood along a spectrum from "loved less" to "covenantally excluded," rather than as an expression of active malice or personal contempt, and that this understanding would have been accessible to audiences throughout the biblical and early post-biblical periods given the wide attestation of the idiom across Hebrew law, ANE diplomacy, prophetic literature, sectarian Judaism, and Gospel tradition.[4][17][8][9][^19]

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